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SUBJECT: IRAQI POLITICOS PONDER NEW GOVERNMENT: SHIA
ISLAMISTS PREPARE TO COURT THE SUNNI ARABS, A WILLING BRIDE

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY ROBERT S. FORD, REASON 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary: With even the preliminary announcement of most election results still days away, Iraqi political operatives are trying to consolidate alliances. Prime Minister Jafari and Adil Abdel Mehdi, Jafari's rival within the Shia Islamist Coalition (List 555), each are trying to line up support. Jafari and Abdel Mehdi allies each think their side will prevail, they told us December 17; both think they have the support of independents and Fadilah, for example. Jafari's strategy is clearly to first prevail within the List 555 camp over Abdel Mehdi and then present both the Kurds and the Sunni Arabs with a fait accompli and cut a deal with them. Both Abdel Mehdi and Jafari are likely to reach out to the Kurds and the Sunni Tawaffuq Front (List 618) even before the competition inside the List 555 is resolved. Meanwhile, a prominent member of List 618 told us December 17 that the Sunni Arabs must make a deal with the Shia Islamists and join the government. If the Sunni Arabs political leaders are cut out of the governing coalition, he warned, it would undo all the political gains in the Sunni Arab community from the December election. He opined that the Sunni Arab community must have either the Presidency or the Prime Minister's job, and Defense and Interior must go to security professionals rather than politicians. If Bayan Jabr Solagh returns as Interior Minister or Prime Minister, he huffed, the Sunni Arabs would quit the political process definitively. End Summary.

Jafari Wants to Stay at Top

12. (C) Prime Minister Jafari's top aide, Adnan Ali, told PolCouns December 17 that Jaafari would work hard to retain his position as PM. Al-Kathemi emphasized that Jaafari wanted to finalize the government formation quickly. Kathemi claimed that Jaafari received a message of support from Mohammed Redha Sistani December 16, and Jaafari visited Najaf on December 17 to consolidate his support from both Sistani and Muqtada (whom al-Kathemi said is strongly in Jaafari's camp). He told PolCouns on December 18 that Jafari had received messages supporting his staying on as Prime Minister from Sadr via Baha al-Araji and from Fadilah from Ayatollah Yacubi who received a Da'wa delegation late last week. Kathemi also claimed that Da'wa Tanzim's leader Musawi would support Jafari (he urged PolCouns not to focus on Minister of State for National Security al-Anzi as the decision-maker in Da'wa Tanzim.)

Reaching Out to the Sunni Arabs

13. (C) Al-Kathemi said they would immediately reach out to the Sunni Tawffuq group (list 618). He told PolCouns he had met Adnan Dulaymi on December 18 and asked Dulaymi to appoint negotiators to work with Jafari's camp on ministerial posts. He said Dulaymi was non-committal (but al-Kathemi didn't seem concerned). Kathemi highlighted that Jaafari wanted a Sunni Arab to be president, not Talabani.

14. (C) PolCouns told al-Kathemi that the USG wants to see a capable government formed as quickly as possible. He cautioned that people should be selected not on the basis of political connections only but also on the basis of demonstrated management and technical skills. He also stated that the security-related portfolios could not be given to partisan political figures or those with ties to militias. Al-Kathemi recalled his warnings to us in April 2005 about the risks of Bayan Jabr and said Jaafari strongly wanted non-partisan people in the security jobs.

Other Shia Islamists Want Him Out

15. (C) Over dinner December 17 Qassem Daoud, number one on the 555 list for Najaf (arguably the 555 list's safest seat), told PolCouns that he and the other 29 independents on the 555 list would support Adil Abdel Mehdi for Prime Minister, not Jaafari. (He included among the list Husayn Shahrastani and Shaykh Mohammed Radhi.) He said Jaafari's

administration had been inept and Iraq needs a change. Poloff at dinner heard from Shahrستاني himself that Abdel Mehdi expected to have support for his prime minister candidacy from the 30 independents the 555 list expected to have in the new assembly, plus the 30 SCIRI representatives, the 13 Da'wa Tanzim representatives and the 15 Fadhila delegates. These 88 should be quite sufficient to shoot down Jaafari's drive to return to the prime ministry.

More Bidders for the Sunni bride

16. (C) Daoud asserted to Poloff that the 555 leadership understood the importance of bringing the Sunni Arabs into the government. Shahrستاني had been named as the 555 negotiator with the Tawaffuq list, and Daoud claimed that Shahrستاني was to meet Ayed Samarrai'e, the number two of the Iraqi Islamic Party, within days.

17. (C) Daoud opined that Mehdi would be politically moderate and would bring in competent people. Daoud thought Interior Minister Jabr had been too polarizing. Non-partisan technocrats were needed in both the Defense and Interior ministries, and Daoud speculated that Abdel Mehdi would have the political power to appoint them. He readily agreed with PolCouns' point that persons with ties to militia would be inappropriate.

A 555 List Member Lists Constitution Changes

18. (C) Daoud thought it important that the new assembly quickly begin work on five key constitutional amendments:

-- the central government's authority over present and future hydrocarbons revenues must be affirmed;

-- the central government's authority to tax must be affirmed;

-- the central government's sole responsibility for foreign relations must be affirmed;

-- the central government's sole responsibility for military (not police) forces must be affirmed; Daoud thought the risk of militias posed an enormous threat.

-- the supremacy of central government law over regions' laws in case of conflict must be established.

Kirkuk Sunni Arab Politician Enthused

19. (C) On December 17, Deputy Prime Minister Abid Mutlag al-Jubouri enthused about how well the elections had gone in Kirkuk (where he headed the Tawaffuq List 618 slate). He claimed there is a real chance to reduce violence by convincing the Sunni Arab community that the political process can work. He listed for us steps he feels are essential for this to happen:

-- it should be balanced, without extremists, and without "ties to neighboring countries;" implying Iran.

-- a Sunni Arab must become either President or Prime Minister;

-- Sunni Arabs must be brought into the ruling coalition along with Shia Islamists and the Kurdish Alliance. If they were kept out, the political gains from the election in the Sunni Arab community would be lost;

-- the new ministers for the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior should be either Sunni Arabs or at least non-partisan security professionals from the former Iraqi Army. (He said there are Shi'a officers whom the Sunni Arabs trust.)

But He Has Lots of Demands Too

110. (C) Al-Jubouri warned that if Bayan Jabr remains as the Minister of Interior Sunni Arab support for the new government would be finished. PolCouns reviewed our goal of seeing a capable, strong government that is representative of Iraq's key communities stood up quickly. Al-Jubouri appeared relieved when PolCouns noted that we did not want a figure tied to militias occupying top positions in the security organizations.

111. (C) Al-Jubouri said new ministers should not have

lived abroad for decades because average Iraqis view such people as outsiders. He commented snidely that many political figures have been back in Iraq for 2 1/2 years, but their families remain outside the country, and the Iraqi public knows this. He also maintained that although an alliance with former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, the head of the Iraqi National Accord, would appease secularists and Ba'athists - and balance the Kurdish influence - Allawi ultimately is not a vital to forming the new government. (By contrast, he thought the Sunni Arab Tawaffuq bloc is.)

Comment

12. (C) The Sunni Arab Tawaffuq list may distrust and dislike the Shia Islamists, but we sense great readiness on both sides to deal. Indeed, if Jafari and Abdel Mehdi each are sending envoys to talk to the Tawaffuq list, they will end up bidding against each other. Abdel Mehdi probably committed an initial faux pas by having Shahrستاني, whose Iranian name alone raises suspicions among many in Tawaffuq. Meanwhile, Jafari will have a harder time with the Kurds. Curiously, Allawi's camp so far appears little engaged with anyone, and we will urge them to open lines of discussions. It is also important to remember that on December 19 we are only at the very first stage of what likely will be very hard negotiations.

KHALILZAD